

# Gibraltar & Tarifa: Whales, Dolphins & Autumn Migration

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 20 September 2005

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Images by Paul Marshall



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Phil Shepherd (co-leader)

Tour participants: John Pawson  
Jill Pawson  
Diana Wright  
Janine Marchant  
June Marchant  
Alan Whitwell  
Mary Dyer  
Asa Wilson  
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## Friday 16 September

### El Algorrobo and Tarifa

The group arrived on time in Gibraltar accompanied by co-leader Phil and met Paul who had been in the area for several days. After negotiating the border we headed west into Spain. Despite the strong southwesterly wind it was hot and sunny with some cloud cover.

Before long we arrived at our first stop, El Algorrobo raptor watchpoint in the hills above Algerciras. Raptors were in evidence as we made our way up the gravel track. Within minutes of arriving we were watching our first Griffon Vultures and Booted Eagles. Over a leisurely if slightly windy lunch we enjoyed the spectacle of migrating raptors. More than a hundred Booted Eagles and forty Short-toed Eagles made up the majority of the numbers, along with smaller numbers of Honey Buzzards and single Egyptian Vulture and Osprey. Black Storks are always an impressive site and a flock of seven against blue skies looked particularly striking.

A flock of fifty migrating Bee-eaters provided a splash of colour and seventy Alpine Swifts were an impressive sight. A single Swallowtail butterfly was a welcome distraction from the neck straining required for watching migrating raptors.

As it had been an early start for the group we made our way to our hotel near Tarifa and had a couple of hours relaxing in our rooms and around the landscaped gardens.

The option of a pre-dinner walk along the beach at Tarifa was taken up by most of the group. The mix of waders included Kentish Plover, Sanderling and Bar-tailed Godwit. Amongst the numerous Yellow-legged Gulls we found five Audouin's Gulls, one of the rarest gulls in the world.

Turning our attention to the dunes we enjoyed good views of several Tawny Pipits and Corn Buntings amongst more familiar Goldfinches, Linnets and Stonechats. The highlight of the evening however was four flying Little Bustards spotted by Phil. Being willed by the group the birds flew overhead and circled the area before being joined by five more and eventually flying off into the distance.

Satisfied with an excellent first day we returned to the hotel for a delicious Spanish meal and a good night's sleep.

## Saturday 17 September

La Janda, Cazalla and Tarifa

Yesterday's strong winds had eased somewhat but unfortunately not enough to allow us into the Straits of Gibraltar on our planned boat trip. Instead we headed west after breakfast to La Janda, a former extensive shallow lake. Despite being drained to make way for agriculture the area can still be rich in birds.

Before we had even stopped the minibus the number of White Storks present was obvious. Over two hundred were counted feeding in the fields surrounding our first stop. Birds were everywhere and it was difficult to know which way to look!

A minimum of ten Marsh Harriers quartered the fields and amongst them several immature Montagu's Harriers. The longer wings, more relaxed flight and brilliant rusty orange underparts of the latter made them easy to tell apart. Two Short-toed Eagles sat on a telegraph pole and several Griffon Vultures circled overhead.

Turning our attention to the waterbirds in the area a flock of thirty-five Glossy Ibis appeared from the rice fields and a nearby cattle field held seven Collared Pratincoles. The birds showed well on the ground but it wasn't until the birds were flushed by cattle that the true agility of this species could be appreciated. Green Sandpiper and Snipe were flying around and we were distracted by a Squacco Heron that flew in front of the group and landed in one of the drainage channels.

Moving further down the track a stunning dark phase Montagu's Harrier flew in front of the minibus. Looking across ploughed fields there were hundreds of Cattle Egrets and more than forty Lesser Kestrels. Careful searching produced two Black-shouldered Kites, yet another superb species of raptor. Passerines weren't ignored and after seeing several small flocks of sparrows we eventually had good views of Spanish Sparrows, and heard Cetti's Warbler from the drainage ditches.

With lunchtime fast approaching we made our way back along the track but not before an immature Bonelli's Eagle appeared and circled the fields. Back at the hotel a much needed caffeine fix was appreciated by several of the group.

For lunch we headed to a raptor watchpoint in the hills above Tarifa. The continuing windy conditions meant viewing raptors was difficult but the continued presence of several close Griffon Vultures entertained everyone. Four Egyptian Vultures appeared with them for a while allowing everybody to watch both species in the same field of view. After a couple of hours enjoying the vultures, Booted and Short-toed Eagles we returned to the hotel.

From late afternoon the group split and Paul took most people into Tarifa where an enjoyable couple of hours was spent walking around the old town, shops and cafes. Phil, Alan and Janine returned to the beach at Tarifa.

Janine spied a lone bird perched up on a prickly pear bush in a pig field behind the beach, which turned out to be a juvenile Red-backed Shrike – a good migrant find for the area. More close-up views of Tawny Pipits in the short dune vegetation followed, along with a similar line-up of gulls and waders to the previous day, augmented by around 30 Sandwich Terns.

After another excellent meal at the hotel everybody went to bed hoping the wind would ease overnight allowing us the chance to get out on a boat.

## Sunday 18 September

Bolonia, Straits of Gibraltar, El Algorrobo and Huerta Grande

The option of an early morning trip along the coast to Bolonia was taken up by the majority of the group. We arrived as the sun was rising above the hills. The clear conditions and light winds were a perfect start to the day.

For the first hour of the day we enjoyed superb views of thirty Griffon Vultures as they perched, called and flew low overhead at a rocky outcrop above Bolonia. Telescope filling views of a Griffon Vulture in perfect morning light is a sight to remember. Amongst the rocks several Blue rock Thrushes gave good views but the Sardinian Warblers proved to be more elusive. Overhead the first of the days migrant raptors were noted with twelve Sparrowhawks counted.

Moving to the beach at Bolonia we found a flock of Bee-eaters perched on telephone wires. Telescopes were quickly set up and everybody enjoyed watching these beautiful birds huddled together. A minimum of fifteen Audouin's Gulls was particularly appreciated by those who had not been to Tarifa beach. Around the small freshwater pool a small flock of Yellow Wagtails (of the race *iberiae*), several Willow and Sardinian Warblers and a brief Hoopoe which managed to do an amazing vanishing trip!

We returned to the hotel for breakfast and our whale watching trip into the Straits of Gibraltar was confirmed much to the delight of everybody. After breakfast we headed to the port in Tarifa and enjoyed a fascinating talk on the cetaceans found in the area given by the staff of the research foundation who would be taking us out.

Heading out of Tarifa port we made our way across the Straits towards Africa. The clear and calm conditions provided excellent viewing opportunities but with the exception of several Cory's Shearwaters things were relatively quiet. However before long the engines were cut and our skipper pointed out a pod of Long-finned Pilot Whales making their way towards the boat.

Over the next hour we enjoyed over thirty of these fascinating marine mammals around the boat. The views were exceptional as animals passed around and under the boat. The clear waters allowed us to see the animals underwater as well as watching them spy-hopping and coming to the surface for air. Several calves were present with the group and could be seen sticking closely to their parents. A single Bottle-nosed Dolphin and two Common Dolphins put in brief appearances but all too quickly the Pilot Whales headed off and it was time for us to return to land.

With plenty of broad smiles we headed east along the coast to the raptor watchpoint we had visited on the first day. Raptor migration was a little slow compared to recent days but we enjoyed another picnic lunch whilst scanning the skies. The highlight was over seventy Black Storks passing overhead in small flocks and amongst the small numbers of Booted and Short-toed Eagles was a single Osprey.

With lunch over we headed to the nearby Huerta Grande for our last stop of the day. Despite the heat small birds were in evidence and the trees around the visitor centre held Pied Flycatcher, Crested Tit, Short-toed Treecreeper and three brief Hawfinches. Our target bird remained a little more elusive and it wasn't until we were leaving that we heard a Firecrest call. Two then showed superbly allowing everybody superb views of this cracking species.

Late afternoon we returned to the hotel for our final evening and meal in Spain.

## Monday 19 September

### Gibraltar

Following an early breakfast we loaded up the minibus and headed towards Gibraltar. We arrived at the border without incident and waited a short while to cross from Spain to Gibraltar. Whilst waiting a Northern Wheatear provided a brief distraction.

Once over the border we dropped luggage at our hotel, prepared a picnic lunch and made our way to the cable car station at the bottom of The Rock. Once at the top we enjoyed the fantastic views whilst trying to avoid the attentions of the local Barbary Macaques. From the viewing platform we found single Blue Rock Thrush and Lesser Whitethroat.

As some lingering cloud and mist burnt away the first of several Booted Eagles passed close to us as we made our way to O'Harra's Battery. The clear, hot and sunny weather meant birds were in short supply but Booted Eagles continued to show well. We slowly made our way down the Rock via the botanical gardens where good views of Two-tailed Pasha butterflies were enjoyed.

After a much needed stop at the hotel to refresh ourselves we headed to Europa Point, the southern tip of Gibraltar. Scanning offshore produced good views of Cory's Shearwaters and several Balearic Shearwaters. A little more distantly were a pod of Common/Striped Dolphins. The animals were feeding and accompanied by shearwaters, gulls, Gannets and a single Arctic Skua. Before we left three Peregrines flew over calling and locked in aerial combat.

Phil took Helen and Aase out into Algeciras bay for the afternoon on a dolphin-watching cruise. Dolphin numbers have been in decline in the bay for a number of years, so we were very pleased to get superb views of around 20 Common and 6 Striped Dolphins. The pod stayed around the boat for 20 minutes. Several Black Terns were seen 'picking' at the water surface, and a very tired looking Sparrowhawk flew alongside the boat for a few minutes, looking entirely out of context.

The last evening was spent in an Italian restaurant at the hotel enjoying fine food and wine and reliving the highlights of the holiday

## Tuesday 20 September

### Gibraltar

Those departing on the early flight to London Gatwick left the hotel after breakfast with Paul.

Phil accompanied the remaining three members of the group to Jew's Gate and were able to watch several migrant birds being ringed.

Mist-netted birds being processed included Blackcap, Willow Warbler, Sparrowhawk and, more unusually, Subalpine and Orphean warblers. The staff at Jews Gate were very friendly and helpful, letting us have a really good close look at the birds in the hand.

Next stop was a dolphin-watching boat trip back into Algeciras bay. Over 50 Common Dolphins were seen, very close to the boat, plus a handful of striped dolphins. A distant feeding frenzy of seabirds led us to the right area, which included Cory's and Balearic shearwaters, and Black Terns. Also seen clearly close to the boat was an Ocean Sunfish, lazily flapping its dorsal fin at the surface.

We rounded the day off drinking coffee and watching around 50 Booted Eagles spiralling directly above the main town square – a vivid example of the awesome number of raptors to be seen in this fantastic part of the world.

## Birds

H = heard only (not counted in the totals)

	Common Name	Scientific Name	TL	September				
				16	17	18	19	20
1	Cory's Shearwater	<i>Calonectris diomedea</i>	ü			ü	ü	
2	Balearic Shearwater	<i>Puffinus mauretanicus</i>	ü				ü	
3	Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>	ü	ü			ü	
4	Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
5	Squacco Heron	<i>Ardeola ralloides</i>	ü		ü			
6	Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	ü			ü		
7	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	ü	ü	ü		ü	
8	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
9	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	ü		ü			
10	Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	ü		ü			
11	Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	ü		ü			
12	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
13	Egyptian Vulture	<i>Neophron percnopterus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
14	Griffon Vulture	<i>Gyps fulvus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
15	Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>	ü		ü			
16	Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	ü		ü			
17	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
18	Honey Buzzard	<i>Pernis apivorus</i>	ü	ü		ü		
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	ü	ü				
20	Bonelli's Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus fasciatus</i>	ü		ü			
21	Booted Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus pennatus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
22	Short-toed Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
23	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	ü	ü		ü		
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
25	Lesser Kestrel	<i>Falco naumanni</i>	ü	ü	ü			
26	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	ü			ü	ü	
27	Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>	ü		ü			
28	Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			H			
29	Little Bustard	<i>Tetrax tetrax</i>	ü	ü				
30	Collared Pratincole	<i>Glareola pratincola</i>	ü		ü			
31	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
32	Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
33	Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
34	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	ü	ü	ü			
35	Bar-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa lapponica</i>	ü	ü	ü			
36	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	ü	ü				
37	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	ü		ü			
38	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	ü		ü			
39	Audouin's Gull	<i>Larus audouinii</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
40	Mediterranean Gull	<i>Larus melanocephalus</i>	ü			ü		
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	ü	ü	ü		ü	
42	Yellow-legged Gull	<i>Larus cachinnans</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
43	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
44	Sandwich Tern	<i>Sterna sandvicensis</i>	ü	ü	ü		ü	
45	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	ü	ü		ü	ü	
46	Little Tern	<i>Sterna albifrons</i>	ü	ü				
47	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	ü	ü		ü	ü	
48	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	ü		ü			
49	Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü1	
50	Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia turtur</i>	ü		ü			
51	Alpine Swift	<i>Apus melba</i>	ü	ü		ü		
52	Pallid Swift	<i>Apus pallidus</i>	ü				ü	

	Common Name	Scientific Name	TL	September				
				16	17	18	19	20
53	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	ü			ü		
54	Bee-eater	<i>Merops apiaster</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
55	Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	ü		ü	ü		
56	(Iberian) Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis sharpei</i>				H		
57	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>	ü			ü		
58	Crested Lark	<i>Galerida cristata</i>	ü		ü	ü		
59	Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella brachydactyla</i>	ü	ü				
60	Calandra Lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	ü		ü			
61	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	ü		ü	ü		
62	Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Hirundo daurica</i>	ü		ü	ü		
63	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	ü	ü	ü		ü	
64	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	ü		ü			
65	Tawny Pipit	<i>Anthus campestris</i>	ü	ü	ü			
66	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	ü			ü		
67	Yellow (Iberian) Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava (iberiae)</i>	ü			ü		
68	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				H	H	
69	Stonechat	<i>Saxicola torquata</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
70	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	ü				ü	
71	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	ü			ü	ü	
72	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	ü		ü	ü	ü	
73	Fan-tailed Warbler	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	ü		ü	ü		
74	Cetti's Warbler	<i>Cettia cetti</i>			H	H		
75	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>	ü			ü		
76	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					H	
77	Sardinian Warbler	<i>Sylvia melanocephala</i>	ü			ü	ü	
78	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	ü			ü		
79	Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>	ü			ü		
80	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	ü			ü		
81	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	ü			ü		
82	Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	ü			ü	ü	
83	Short-toed Treecreeper	<i>Certhia brachydactyla</i>	ü			ü		
84	Woodchat Shrike	<i>Lanius senator</i>	ü		ü			
85	Red-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius collurio</i>	ü		ü			
86	Spotless Starling	<i>Sturnus unicolor</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
87	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü	ü	
88	Spanish Sparrow	<i>Passer hispaniolensis</i>	ü		ü			
89	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	ü	ü		ü	ü	
90	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	ü			ü		
91	Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
92	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	ü	ü	ü			
93	Corn Bunting	<i>Miliaria calandra</i>	ü	ü	ü	ü		
	<b>Daily total</b>			43	55	53	27	0
	<b>Grand total</b>		88					

## Cetaceans

Common name	Scientific name	TL	September				
			16	17	18	19	20
Common Dolphin		ū			2	20	
Striped Dolphin		ū				6	
Bottlenose Dolphin		ū			1		
Long-finned Pilot Whale		ū			30+		
Sperm Whale							
Fin Whale							
Killer Whale							

## Other

Swallowtail  
Two-tailed Pasha  
Red Admiral

Hummingbird Hawkmoth

Moorish Gecko  
Iberian Wall Lizard

Barbary Macaque